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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 KATHMANDU 000787

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SUBJECT: INTO THE MAOIST HEARTLAND - COUNTERINSURGENCY BY
THE BOOK IN ROLPA DISTRICT

REF: KATHMANDU 377

Classified By: Amb. M.E. Malinowski, Reasons 1.5 (b), (d).

1. (S) Summary. Emboffs joined Royal Nepalese Army (RNA) Western Division Commander on an inspection tour of newly established garrisons in Rolpa district, considered the Maoist heartland. The tour coincided with the deployment of the PACOM assessment team to the Rolpa battalion headquarters. Two RNA task forces have completed sweeps through eastern and northern Rolpa, leaving joint Army, Armed Police and civil police garrisons to restore security in the major towns. This bold incursion, to be followed by similar sweeps through adjacent Maoist districts represents the right strategy, but operational and logistical challenges abound. RNA operations suffer from a lack of good boots as well as a shortage of manpower. Additional arms and ammunition would not be effective without good boots, the RNA commander for western Nepal insisted. Emboffs interviewed two captured Maoist leaders who described the insurgents' tactics. After recent attacks in Dang, RNA efforts to respond were hindered when the Maoists felled trees across the highways and set fires to reduce visibility for helicopters. Although the monsoon will have a negative effect on the RNA's mobility, the Maoists will face the same obstacles. Morale was high in the garrisons, and the response from the citizenry positive. End Summary.

Army Taking Back Rolpa

2. (S) A/DCM and Pol/Miloff accompanied Major General Sadeep Shah, Royal Nepalese Army (RNA) Western Division Commander, on an April 15 tour of Rolpa district. The tour joined up with the PACOM assessment team in the Rolpa district capital of Liwang. Shah and Emboffs also visited newly established garrisons in the district. The RNA had just completed two task force sweeps through northern and eastern Rolpa, one of five districts long referred to as the Maoist heartland. In their wake, the RNA established a permanent presence in the district capital, Liwang, and in three other towns.

Remote Areas Pose a Challenge

3. (S) General Shah and Emboffs met up with the PACOM assessment team at Liwang, which also serves as battalion headquarters. The garrisons Emboffs visited were well sited and well entrenched, suggesting that the RNA has learned from past mistakes such as the poor defenses at the district capital in Accham, overrun by the Maoists in February (Reftel). Daily patrols reach beyond the ridgeline and nighttime observation posts provide early warning capabilities. (Note: The terrain is referred to as "The Hill-Country", but "Hill" must be taken in the context of a country which boasts the world's highest mountains.) The garrison towns in Rolpa are in deep, narrow valleys along riverbeds. The surrounding ridges and mountains rise up to 12,000 feet, and the slopes are forty degrees on average. The centuries-old battle of terraces versus landslides continues, at least in these recovered valleys. Footpath and helicopter are the only ways in or out. The new garrisons remain small and widely separated, and therefore vulnerable to Maoist concentration.

Garrisons Established in Joint Operations

4. (S) General Shah has taken joint operations to heart. Each population center has been garrisoned with a combined force of RNA, Armed Police Force (APF), and Nepal Police personnel. Civil-Military Operations are assisted by the presence of the Chief District Officer (CDO) in Liwang and the attempted re-establishment of ward councils. Schools and health clinics have reopened despite severe resource constraints. Within the patrol range of the garrisons - but outside the garrisoned valleys - the steeply terraced fields were being tilled, though the land remained depopulated. The newly-garrisoned centers are peopled by the elderly and young women with children; young men and boys have reportedly fled the district to avoid being conscripted by the Maoists. Rations are brought in for the garrisons to prevent the depletion of the townspeople's modest food supply, and the

RNA is providing the health centers with medical supplies from its own stocks.

More Sweeps Planned

15. (S) In thorough briefings and a detailed explanation of the situation map at Division Headquarters in Nepalgunj April 14, General Shah and his staff outlined their plans. The two recent task force sweeps through eastern Rolpa would be followed immediately by two more task force sweeps that will establish garrisons in western Rolpa. Other districts in the Maoist heartland - Rukum, Pyuthan, and Surkhet - will follow in succession. Each task force comprises over three hundred men moving in multiple columns carrying 72 hours of rations. Rations are replenished by helicopter at an increasing number of landing zones cleared on hilltops throughout the area of operations.

RNA: It's the Boots

16. (S) General Shah made very clear that while he desperately wants to re-equip his units with M-16A-2 rifles, his greatest need is for boots. After shoes, good quality uniforms are his second priority, and medical supplies third. Arms then come fourth. Shah did not raise the issue of helicopters, but when prompted stated that their primary usefulness to him would be for re-supply and casualty evacuation. Shah stated that M-16s would be only marginally useful without boots to get the firepower where he needs it. Shah and his staff reiterated that their biggest challenge is the "paucity of troops." Nevertheless, Shah has compressed the training cycle for new recruits under his command so that they can relieve static troops as soon as possible.

Captured Maoists Interviewed

17. (S) Shah allowed Emboffs to interview two captured Maoist leaders who have agreed to provide information to the RNA. The former Maoists gave detailed accounts of their assaults, relating how they concentrated in nearby villages where they were not necessarily welcome and used untrained and unarmed villagers to fill out the ranks and provide human shields for the armed cadre. When asked how the Maoists were instructed to treat villagers, one said that they had been admonished not to take "even needle and thread" from the people, but to participate in village life and help till the fields. However, he continued, in most cases by the time he and his comrades reached a village they would be far too tired to do anything but eat the villagers' food and sleep.

Readout on Dang Attack: RNA's Reaction Capability Lacking

18. (S) With multiple exposed garrisons and a "paucity of troops," Shah is hard-pressed to reinforce or relieve positions under sudden siege, he explained. Relief columns sent to the assistance of the recently overrun APF post at Satbaria, Dang district, had to travel hours overland. Moreover, Maoists had hampered their progress with trees felled across the road and boulders strewn across bridges. A helicopter, launched at night to provide more ammunition to the defenders, could not locate the position because of the dark and the smoke from fires set by the Maoists.

19. (S) Shah was able to set up blocking positions at choke points six and twelve hours' march away from the attack site. The RNA succeeded in ambushing the Maoists best-trained and best-armed "First Platoon" two days after the attack. Rather than immediately fleeing the area, this platoon moved into a village and locked everyone inside their houses. After two days they commandeered a bus and drove brazenly down Nepal's main east-west highway, right into an alert RNA roadblock. The small unit at the roadblock spotted the Maoists, in battle regalia and with a light machine gun on the hood of the bus, and opened fire, killing seventeen. The rest of the platoon fled into the jungle.

Monsoon to Affect Both Sides

10. (S) The arrival of the monsoon in mid-June will affect operations, Shah speculated. Clear weather for the few helicopters will be limited. Shah intends to overcome this by significantly increasing the stocks of rations and ammunition at the many garrisons. He points out, however, that the monsoon will affect the Maoists as well. Their movement will be restricted to the main trails and they will not be able to cross the four great rivers coursing down from the Himalayas in spate. Shah believes the RNA, at least in his area of operations, will have the advantage, provided they have the boots and M-16s that will give them a decided edge over their opponents

Morale Up, But Trouble Expected

11. (S) Morale among the RNA, Armed Police Force (APF) and Nepal Police appeared high, in part because of the presence of the Americans. Even Rolpa's Chief District Officer (CDO) was positive despite the fact that Liwang has been without electricity or phone service for the last four months, and he exerts little control and has no resources. There was a general sense, here and at the smaller and more isolated town of Thawang, that the GON is doing it right and winning back towns and people from the Maoists. Needless to say, all the garrisons expect to be attacked, as the Maoists cannot afford to let these initially successful incursions by the GON stand.

Comment

12. (S) The PACOM assessment team's report will provide a much more complete analysis of RNA operations and requirements. It is clear, however, that the Western Division Commander is applying a proven formula to combat the armed insurgency. Resource limitations may spell the difference between victory and defeat in the Maoist heartland. If security can be established, the GON will have the opportunity to deliver services and win back hearts and minds. Donor assistance will be important at that stage. The RNA's designs aside, the Maoists cannot disregard this attack at their very roots.

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